

Sunday, October 17, 2010

“There is such a thing as too late.” [MLK, Jr., April 7, 1967, Riverside Church]

It can be true, realistically, that something is “not possible.” Or that we are “too late.”

There is much evidence that both may be true of averting proliferation, avoiding nuclear terrorism and nuclear wars, or averting the eventual destruction of civilization by nuclear winter or by human-caused climate change.

But no one can be certain of either of these—“not possible, too late”—**in advance**. It is a judgment that can be made with very high confidence only in retrospect.

To act in advance on either judgment can be a reasonable gamble: but it is never totally compelling. It’s a matter of judgment, a choice.

**I choose to act as if we have a chance to avert these evils, in time.** I urge others to consider doing the same. As if it is possible, not impossible, to preserve our civilization humanely: as if we have time to do so, though perhaps just barely, if we act together with courage and awareness and compassion.

It may indeed already be too late, not possible: **but no one can prove that.** The evidence in favor of those conclusions is what defines the situation as urgent.

Nor is the argument for rejecting such conclusions altogether compelling or always right. “Giving up,” “accepting the inevitable” passively and in despair is not the only response to them; they may be the necessary stimulus to abandoning unpromising (failed, “hopeless”) forms of action in favor of new or previously unexamined or rejected alternatives, or searching, exploring, imagining new forms of understanding or acting.

“Quitting,” even “surrendering,” accepting failure or defeat, is not always the wrong course. It is usually postponed far too long, with terrible human effect, by the eventual losers in war, as in World Wars I and II, the Civil War, Vietnam. (That is obvious in retrospect; but there were always wise voices advocating it-- reviled within their societies as defeatists or traitors--at the time.)

“Hope” or “faith”—in the possible success, the avoidance of catastrophe in **what we are doing**--is not always a virtue, let alone obligatory; it can be a deadly, homicidal snare. (That is best avoided—though again, not always!—when what we are doing is non-violent.)

We **are** on the Titanic, heading at high speed on a dangerous course in darkness. Icebergs ahead are already in sight. Is it too late to avoid them: to miss them by swerving, to slow down or stop dead in the water, to reverse course and change our route? It may be. But it may not be. We must choose how to suppose and how to act.